

By Nancy Corcoran, CSJ

Place a small dish of sweet oil next to an open bible and lighted candle. Pass the oil so all can dip a finger in the oil and bless themselves.

LEADER: Gracious God, you ask us to seek righteousness and humility.

ALL: May we do no wrong and utter no lies.

LEADER: Embrace us, Holy One, as we seek refuge in your Name.

ALL: May we have courage to do your will.

Who does God bless? The obvious answer is the rich, happy, important people. In the beatitudes Jesus insists God blesses people who are poor, sorrowing, lowly, those who hunger and thirst for justice, and work for peace. Jesus opens our eyes to people we aren't seeing.

My family moved from Boston to Miami when I was in seventh grade. As my sister and I were shopping for school supplies at Sears, we spotted water fountains with the words *colored* next to one and *white* next to the other. The idea of colored water intrigued us. We tried both fountains. But in both the water was clear and tasted like the water in Boston.

Next we checked the colored bathroom only to find it painted white. The white bathroom was pink.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

I found our mother and told her of our discoveries. She went directly to the manager and expressed her shock and dismay that Sears exposed her children to segregation, which the Supreme Court had outlawed three years earlier. We bought no supplies and Mother wrote to the company president.

I witnessed the injustice of segregation that day. But it has taken much longer to see racism and white privilege in my own life.

When I was doing literacy ministry in rural Alabama, Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, challenged me to attend a summer session at the Black Catholic Institute in New Orleans, Louisiana. Sister Thea, a Catholic sister, a teacher, a scholar, an evangelist who preached the good news we are truly sisters and brothers died too young (1939-1990). She shared the beauty of African

American culture and spirituality with all of us whose lives she touched.

My first morning at the Institute I dashed to the cafeteria for breakfast. Thea came a bit later, and after looking over the seating arrangement, she announced in her commanding voice, "Oh, I see Nancy is sitting with only white folks!"

I blushed a deep red and continued eating. At lunch, it happened again. Thea announced to the gathered diners, "Again, Nancy is sitting with white folks!"

I was mortified! At supper, I timidly approached a table of African American fellow students, and in a quaking voice, asked to join their table. My Black tablemates welcomed me. I had projected that they would reject me as I knew my culture has rejected them. But this was not my experience.

Thea blessed me that day. I was blessed to realize that I could break out of the pattern of seeking my comfort zone. I could go where it scared me. I grew in courage.

● When has breaking out of your comfort zone opened new insights for you?



GOSPEL

The beatitudes promise God's blessings to those left out.

NARRATOR: When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the mountainside. After he sat down, his disciples gathered around him, and Jesus began to teach them.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the sorrowing, for they shall be consoled.

Blessed are those of low status; they shall inherit the land.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for holiness, for they shall have their fill.

Blessed are they who show mercy, for mercy shall be theirs.

Blessed are the single-hearted, for they shall see God.

Blessed, too, are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of holiness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Blessed are you when people insult and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward in heaven is great.

Matthew 5.1-12



though Roman power keeps them poor and oppressed.

Jesus grew up among the poor who work each day to survive. Jewish people farmed small plots of land, growing wheat for flour. They pressed olives for oil to make bread. They had grape vines and fruit trees. They paid taxes to Rome, to Herod, and to the temple.

For the people Jesus teaches in Galilee, his sayings are an outburst against injustice and the system that keeps them in their lowly place. His vision lifts up the poor and lowly, affirms their dignity, and promises God does not forget them.

● Which beatitude do you relate to most?

● Why do people so often choose the beatitudes as the gospel reading at funerals?

The beatitudes state Jesus' essential message. These eight powerful statements confront the mindset of the Romans and their empire, a mindset that exists in our world today—power and money rule.

Some translations use the word *happy* rather than *blessed* to begin each of the beatitudes: Happy are the poor in spirit. Happy are those who mourn. Happy are the meek.

Our consumer culture bombards us with advertisements that promise the happiness we deserve if we drive a new car, take a vacation, and install better

Who does God bless? Who do we bless?

My mother's outburst in the store embarrassed me, but it also awakened me to an injustice. Years later that embarrassment turned to a commitment on my part to make a difference in confronting injustice. Thinking about this incident as I read Sunday's gospel makes me see the beatitudes Jesus is teaching in a new way. His beatitudes turn the world upside down and bless the 95% of the population

in his time who are poor, hungry and thirsty for justice, looking to God for help.

Jesus lives in occupied territory. Romans rule. The Jews of his time live under an occupying army, made aware of their subservience on a daily basis. In a culture whose citizens worship the emperor for his strength and power, Jesus challenges the ethic of "might makes right." Jesus insists that God blesses his listeners even

windows. In Jesus' time all wealth flowed toward Rome. In our time all wealth has flowed toward the wealthiest 1%.

The beatitudes challenge us to find God's blessings in our own experiences of losing status, of mourning loved ones, of hungering for fairness. The beatitudes call us to solidarity with those who live in poverty or oppression, to be God's blessing to those in need.

In the beatitudes Jesus expresses a prophetic paradox. He lives among the poor and sees injustice around him. Unlike some prophets of old, Jesus does not rave and rant. Jesus speaks with authority as he offers a vision of the world God wants us to create. The kingdom Jesus envisions values people who are poor and blesses those who suffer with the sorrowing, endure hunger and thirst for food and for justice, who show mercy.

● What signs of being blessed or happy do you see people in our culture valuing today?

● Whose experience of poverty, sorrow, lowliness, persecution, peace making has blessed you?

Jesus uses the word *blessed* nine times in the beatitudes. *Blessed*, *berakhah* in Hebrew, is not a verb, but

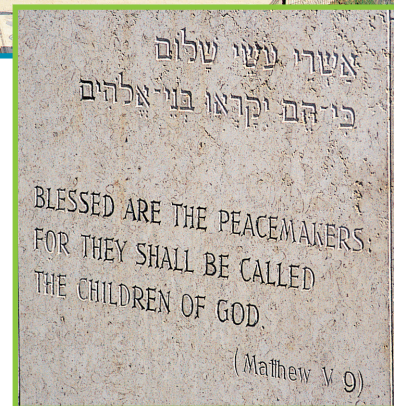


The Church of the Beatitudes sits on a hill on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, overlooking the lake.

rather an adjective that identifies God's creative goodness at work. Jesus is telling us that when we live the beatitudes, we live God's way with love and justice for all.

Lists of the beatitudes usually include only eight. The last beatitude repeats the eighth but changes voice from the third person to the second person, addressing us, the readers. It challenges us to live Jesus' teaching and continue his mission even if bringing the poor and hungry to our tables causes persecution.

Mahatma (Great Soul) Gandhi, the Hindu who led the struggle for India's independence from British colonial rule, admired Jesus as a teacher. "The message of Jesus as I understand it," said Gandhi, "is contained in the sermon on



the mount unadulterated and taken as a whole... If then I had to face only the sermon on the mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, 'Oh, yes, I am a Christian.'

At another time, Gandhi remarked: "Ah, yes, Christianity. A great philosophy, I've just never seen it practiced." Jesus' sermon on the mount entrances many nonChristian religious leaders.

● Why do you think lists usually leave out the ninth beatitude?

● What entrances you about Jesus' teachings?

● Which beatitude is the most difficult for you to imitate? Which is easiest?

C

H

A

R

I

T

Y

DO SOMETHING

J

U

S

T

I

C

E

What invisible barriers separate neighbors from each other in your area? How can you break out of your comfort zone, meet, and get to know them? How can you work together to break down the barriers? Who can you welcome into your own activities?

Zephaniah calls us to seek justice, humility.

The prophet Zephaniah rains judgment upon the people of his time, which is the reign of the reformer, King Josiah (640-609 B.C.). One of Israel's 12 minor prophets, Zephaniah preaches the nearness of the day of the Lord, a day of wrath, distress, anguish, ruin, devastation, darkness, gloom.

Danger abounds for Israel in the political turmoil of Zephaniah's time. Israel is a vassal state of Assyria until the Assyrian armies retreat to their homeland (Iraq today) to stave off the Babylonians growing threat to their empire. The Babylonian threat gives the southern kingdom of Judah an interval of independence.

However, sensing a political vacuum, Egypt soon moves north to gain territory. The reforming reign of King Josiah ends when he is killed in battle against the Egyptians.

Zephaniah realizes that Judah needs religious renewal. The prophet's words stir the king to initiate reforms and smash the idols the Israelites worship. Zephaniah urges the people of his time to seek God humbly. He calls them to remember and keep God's commands in hope that they "may be hidden on the day of God's anger."

Zephaniah describes a remnant, an ideal people who

will no longer make of themselves gods but rather "seek refuge in the name of the Holy One." This humble remnant "shall do no wrong, nor speak lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths."

With many people today leaving the Church and former Catholics becoming the second largest Christian group in the U.S., some voices echo Zephaniah's harsh judgment. Who belongs among the faithful remnant today? Perhaps the beatitudes offer the real answer to this question. Those who live the gospel Jesus preaches and join God in blessing their neighbors who live in poverty and grief, who work peace, and show mercy.

Who is God's remnant?

**Seek the Lord,
all you humble of the earth,
who have observed God's law;
seek justice, seek humility;
perhaps you may be sheltered on the
day of God's anger.**

**I will leave as a remnant
in your midst,
a people humble and lowly.
The remnant of Israel shall take
refuge in the name of the Holy One.
They shall do no wrong,
nor speak lies,
nor shall a deceitful tongue
be found in their mouths.
They shall pasture their flocks
with none to disturb them.**

Zephaniah 2.3; 3.12-13

● **For what do you think God will judge us harshly in our time?**

● **Why do we tend to forget our reliance on God when things are going well for us?**

● **What do you think Zephaniah might preach today?**

● **Listen to "The Beatitudes" by Sweet Honey in the Rock on both Live at Carnegie Hall and Selections 1976-1988 albums.**

PRAY

Place a candle in your midst and light it as a symbol of Christ's presence. Food shelves and soup kitchens need donations and help this time of year, especially where the weather is cold. In the spirit of the beatitudes, bring canned goods or other donations for those in need. Place them near the Christ candle.

Share the name of those you wish to bless.

Then dip your finger into the bowl of sweet oil and make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person on your right as you say these words:

**May you be blessed
with the courage to
follow Jesus.**



Nancy Corcoran, CSJ, holds a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School. She has studied at Xavier University's Institute for Black Catholic Studies, the Mexican American Cultural Center, and Dar al Islam. She has served as a chaplain in Chicago and Boston.